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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000743

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SUBJECT: DEFMIN MURR SAYS DECISIVE BATTLE WITH FATAH
AL-ISLAM IN "4-5 DAYS"

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.5 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (S) Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias Murr told the Ambassador in a 5/24 meeting that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) will initiate a major assault on Nahr al-Barid camp in about 4-5 days, the time needed to assemble troops and ammunition and clear the camp of as many civilians as possible. He sees such a battle as a make-or-break opportunity for the GOL and LAF. Deeply appreciative of USG ammunition supplies, Murr claimed to have sufficient political backing to ensure a cabinet green light immediately before the operation. Murr estimated that, once the fighting begins, the LAF would face up to 1,000 fighters, as others joined an estimated 200-300 Fatah al-Islam terrorists. Asked what might derail an assault, Murr said that major security problems deriving from other Palestinian camps would overstretch the LAF, and there was a danger that Sunni solidarity against the terrorists might fade under a propaganda onslaught linking Nahr al-Barid to Gaza and Iraq. But he claimed to see no choice for the army: if the army blinks, then the LAF is finished (which was Syria's preferred outcome all along, he believes). In Murr's analysis, the links between Fatah al-Islam and Syria are clear and significant. Minister of Interior Hassan Saba', in a separate meeting with the Ambassador on 5/24, had the same analysis: Fatah al-Islam is under the direct tactical control of Syria. End summary.

BATTLE PREPARATIONS UNDERWAY

12. (S) In a 5/24 meeting with the Ambassador, Deputy PM and Defense Minister Elias Murr expressed determination "to finish with Fatah al-Islam" (FAI). Echoing what LAF intelligence chief Georges Khoury had told the Ambassador and DATT a few days earlier, Murr explained that the army needed three issues to be sufficiently addressed before launching a full-scale assault on Nahr al-Barid refugee camp: sufficient stocks of ammunition, sufficient numbers of troops, and an evacuation of as much of the Palestinian civilian population as possible. Murr expressed deep appreciation for U.S. assistance in securing ammunition supplies at unprecedented speed (and he signed a blanket letter of assurance for the end use of U.S.-origin materiel while meeting with the Ambassador). He noted that the civilian evacuation was well underway. As for the troops, Murr said that he was already quietly moving troops to the north. He was concerned about

quality as well as quantity of the soldiers. For example, despite "squawking from Siniora," Murr shifted the commandos who had been protecting the Prime Minister's Grand Serail headquarters to the north, replacing them with newer recruits in downtown Beirut.

BATTLE TO BEGIN IN 4-5 DAYS;
ENEMY MIGHT NUMBER 1,000 FIGHTERS

13. (S) Murr stated that all the factors would be in place to permit a major assault on, and full invasion of, Nahr al-Barid "in four or five days." Noting that scores of FAI had been killed, wounded, or captured, Murr estimated that 200-300 remain. but the problem is that, once the heavy fighting begins, a variety of "criminals and terrorists" from various Palestinian factions (PFLP-GC, as-Saiqa, etc.) will join in. Murr used overhead imagery to show where various Palestinian factions are headquartered in the camp. Murr thought that, ultimately, the LAF would face up to 1,000 fighters in difficult, house-to-house battles. "We are going to lose at least 100 soldiers," Murr said. "But we have no choice." If the LAF had guided missiles and helicopters with weapons systems, it would be easier; the fighting would be "more precise." But, given the lack of such equipment, the LAF will have to "fight blindly," using overwhelming force to root out the terrorists. "What we really need are Apaches," he said. "And precision weapons." He noted that, given the weaponry in its possession, the LAF will probably "destroy much of the camp" in order to root out FAI.

14. (S) The Ambassador asked Murr if there was any other option. Murr said that he will continue to invite FAI to

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surrender. But they won't, he predicted, leaving the LAF no choice but to fight. While "all of us wish" that the Palestinians themselves would solve the problem by turning over Shaker al-Absi and the other FAI fighters, that will not happen either, in Murr's view.

POLITICAL GREEN LIGHT: NO PROBLEM

15. (S) The Ambassador asked Murr whether he had the political backing for the assault on the camp that he was describing. "Absolutely," Murr said. While Prime Minister Siniora and the other Sunni political figures sometimes have "weak knees" when it comes to facing Sunni extremists, this time they realize that there is no choice but to move forward. The Christian ministers are adamant that the LAF clear the camp. Murr said that he would need a cabinet decision for the full-scale invasion of the camp that is required, but he did not expect a problem. He would wait until the last minute to get the green light to avoid subsequent second-guessing.

SLEIMAN: HE'LL BE ON BOARD

16. (S) As for the army command, Murr said that LAF Commander Michel Sleiman knows that the choice is between destroying FAI or allowing the army to be destroyed. Army morale requires decisive action, "after 17 soldiers were slaughtered in their beds" on the first day of fighting. If the army command would hesitate now, the army would probably fall apart, Murr speculated. Moreover, if Sleiman doesn't move against FAI, "he has zero chance to become president." A successful fight against FAI doesn't guarantee Sleiman the presidency, but he knows it improves his chances. "Don't worry about Sleiman," Murr counseled; "he'll do it."

HIZBALLAH: LET'S HOPE
NASRALLAH STAYS SILENT

17. (S) Asked about Hizballah's silence, Murr chuckled. Hizballah, he said, is "acting like March 14 last summer." Last summer, March 14 leaders were silently wishing that Israel would destroy Hizballah, but they dared not express that view aloud. Today, Hizballah would like FAI destroyed, as Hizballah sees a real danger to such a Sunni extremist group. But Hizballah leaders cannot express that view, as they know that Syria backs FAI. Murr expressed hope that Hizballah leaders would remain silent, but he worried that Syria may order them to start making "dangerous comments," perhaps as early as May 25 ("Liberation Day," commemorating Israel's 2000 withdrawal from south Lebanon). That is one reason, Murr said, he so strongly advocates keeping as low a profile as possible to the U.S. military assistance, lest Syria order Hizballah to use that as propaganda. While Hizballah does not like FAI, Hizballah also "cannot be comfortable" with the idea that the army might prove able to defeat a terrorist group, and with U.S.-provided assistance.

18. (S) As for the other pro-Syrians in Lebanon as well as Michel Aoun, Murr said that they hoped that the LAF would fail -- so that FAI remains as a Syrian tool -- but in such a way that Siniora's cabinet, not the army itself, is held responsible. Michel Aoun's "nightmare" is that the LAF succeeds in crushing FAI, and the credit accrues in part to the Siniora cabinet, strengthening its credibility in the public eye. Murr thought that, of all the pro-Syrians claiming to support the army and decrying the crimes of FAI, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri was the only one genuinely supportive of decisive action against FAI. "The others all want us to fail," he said.

MURR'S WORRIES: PROBLEMS IN OTHER CAMPS;
SUNNI SOLIDARITY STARTS TO CRUMBLE

19. (S) The Ambassador asked Murr whether, given his stated determination that the LAF seize the camp, something could happen between now and the start of the decisive battle that would deter him from proceeding. Murr said that he had two worries. The more significant of the two relates to the other Palestinian camps in Lebanon. If Asbat al-Ansar,

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PFLP-GC, Jund ash-Shams, or other groups start generating trouble from the other camps, then the LAF has a big problem: it will not be able to invade Nahr al-Barid and contain multiple hotspots simultaneously. That is why it is so important to move civilians out of the way in Nahr al-Barid and to move as quickly as possible, he said.

110. (S) Murr's second worry relates to the Sunni leadership. Now, they are all for wiping out FAI; Sunni solidarity is strong and on the side of the army, not the extremists. But what happens, Murr asked, if the pro-Syrians try to paint a picture of a U.S. proxy government, propped up by U.S. military assistance, attacking "good Muslims, just like in Iraq and just like in Palestine?" That is another reason, he urged, to keep U.S. military assistance deliveries as low profile as possible. (As if on queue, PM Siniora called at this point. Conferring with Murr, Siniora, too, asked us to refrain from massive publicity over U.S. military deliveries.) Murr noted that, related to both of his worries, "the pictures from Gaza are very damaging." Israeli actions against Palestinian targets can contribute to a dangerous change in attitudes in Lebanon, he cautioned. "If you could calm down the Israelis, you will help us here," he said.

MURR, MINISTER OF INTERIOR CONVINCED
THAT SYRIA DIRECT FATAH AL-ISLAM

111. (S) The Ambassador asked Murr how confident he was of the links between FAI and Syria. While Syria must be gloating over the problems FAI is causing, is Syria involved

all the way down to a tactical level? Murr argued that FAI is a "wholly owned subsidiary" of Syria. He claimed that the execution-style murders on Sunday were a deliberate Syrian attempt to humiliate the army. FAI's focus on demoralizing and perhaps splitting the army is derived entirely from Syrian orders. FAI fighters who have been captured have talked of Syrian facilitation, in some cases to and from Iraq. There may be al-Qaida links, too, Murr said, noting the large number of foreign fighters killed. But the attacks against the LAF were planned in Syria.

¶12. (S) Separately, the Ambassador met Minister of Interior Hassan Saba' on 5/24. Saba' -- a Sunni -- expressed the same determination as Murr to see FAI destroyed. He also shared Murr's conclusion that FAI is under direct Syrian control. Saba' cited as significant the fact that FAI was able to take over Fatah al-Intifada facilities "without firing a single shot." Given that it is commonly accepted that Fatah al-Intifada was a Syrian-created entity, there is little chance FAI could have so effortlessly overtaken the older group, had Syria not been behind FAI. Moreover, according to Saba', one Saudi national that was arrested told the Internal Security Forces that Syria had recruited him to provide religious fatwas to justify recruitment of foreign fighters for Lebanon rather than Iraq. Iran, too, is involved, Saba' insisted, in providing funding.

COMMENT

¶13. (S) We agree with Murr that the GOL and LAF face what is an existential battle: will the army assure that -- unusually for here -- the Lebanese state prevails over a terrorist organization, or -- as has happened too many times before -- will the GOL blink, ceding ground to the terrorist organization? Unlike his ridiculous statements that "not even a mosquito can cross the Syrian-Lebanese border," Murr said all the right things this time. Never one to shy from positive publicity, Murr is no doubt thinking in part of his own reputation, which is fine with us: if he can indeed play a role in encouraging the army to wipe out a terrorist group with international connections, we are happy to give him the applause that motivates him. While Murr is prone to self-serving exaggeration, we had the sense that he is indeed serious about seeing the FAI challenge as something that will make or break the army. His determination to act appeared genuine. Everything he told us is consistent with what we are hearing from military and intelligence sources.

¶14. (S) Certainly, given all the bureaucratic crockery that has been smashed in succeeding to get ammunition to the LAF

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in a timely matter, the credibility of the LAF in our eyes depends on a willingness to take this battle to the end. But, in the end, whether or not the LAF moves decisively against FAI depends on factors beyond Murr's control. Given the very real fear that Syria will spark unrest in the other Palestinian camps -- unrest that has the potential to tie up LAF resources needed to defeat FAI in Nahr al-Barid -- we are emphasizing to the political and military leadership the need to move as quickly as possible. The fact that we have moved so expeditiously in delivering assistance (and identifying assistance from others) is a tool we are using to prod fast action. But we cannot yet say definitively that the LAF will do what we believe it must: Lebanese politics and security have the habit of inserting nasty surprises into the most sensible scenarios.

¶15. (S) If -- as we hope -- the LAF does move decisively against Fatah al-Islam using LAF's existing and non-precise weapons system, we suggest that we begin thinking now about the Day After. Tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees may return to shattered homes, as they cannot stay in schools in the severely overcrowded Badawi camp indefinitely. As pictures are beamed out of Nahr al-Barid of potentially

widespread destruction, Siniora's cabinet could very well be accused of creating "another Jenin" -- a reference to the IDF's 2002 assault aimed at wiping out a terrorism center in the northern West Bank that resulted in widespread destruction of civilian homes. Whereas only the center of the Jenin camp was pulverized, the LAF could end up destroying much of the physical infrastructure of Nahr al-Barid in an attempt to root out FAI. We hope that we can rapidly identify resources to help UNRWA, the ICRC, and others that will be responsible for finding shelter for what could be thousands of homeless refugees. There will be both a humanitarian and a political imperative to act quickly, we believe, should the LAF carry through with what Murr, rightly, sees as an essential mission.

FELTMAN